

Part Four

THE BLACK HILLS AS A SANCTUARY AND SACRED LANDSCAPE

...The Indian's reverence for the Black Hills is very much like the feeling many people on this earth have for the Holy Land, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Mount Calvary...The Lakota loved the Black Hills for reasons vastly different [from the whites]. They held the Hills as a shrine, a sanctuary for both beast and man. It was a winter haven for the beast of the land, a traditional place of procreation, under the protective shelter of the pines and the deep canyons, a place for worship, where the spiritual yearnings of bewildered mankind were calmed (LaPointe 1979:15, 141-142).

...the oral history, legends, and religious practices of the Cheyennes clearly imply that the Black Hills was where the Cheyenne people became a nation, and where they have lived and made pilgrimages for many generations. In many ways, the area is to them what Jerusalem is to the Jews or Ireland to Irish-Americans. It is their homeland, the scene of the most significant events in their tribal life, and the wellspring of their religious life (Moore 1981: 16).

The Black Hills has long been written about as a place of great beauty and striking topography. Some of the earliest European Americans (Hughes, R. 1957:13; Dodge 1965:25, 49, 149-150; McLaird and Turchen 1974c:296-297; Knappen in Kraus and Olson 1974:23) who traveled the area and wrote about it were struck by the contrast the Hills environment made to the dryness and barrenness of the surrounding prairies and sagebrush steppes. The virtues of the Hills were even extolled in a spiritually inspiring language, with expressions like “these sacred fastnesses,” (Dodge 1965:150), “earthly paradise” (Curtis in Krause and Olson 1974:149), or an “Eden in the clouds” (Burrows in Krause and Olson 1974:208). Although many early writers attributed their beauty and magnificence to some divine intervention, few perceived them as a foundation of their own religiosity.

For most early European Americans, it was not the aesthetics of the Hills that made them most appealing but their potential for economic growth in mining, logging, and ranching (Tallent 1899; Hughes 1957; Dodge 1965:150-151; McLaird and Turchen 1974a:33-35; 1974c:313). In time, however, the Hills' scenic landscapes would support the accumulation of wealth through the aggressive development of the region's leisure and travel industry (Clark 1952b; Lee 1987). The area of Wind Cave and the neighboring Hot Springs became significant to European American peoples primarily as geologic curiosities, although again religious metaphors were sometimes used to describe them (Long 1992:18-21). Over the past century, most of the public writings about these places, from travel guides to local histories, share a common focus on the uniqueness of their geophysical properties. In the case of Wind Cave, there are also interesting sidebar

accounts of how early settlers located the cave, and how it became a focus of a major land dispute. Nothing took place here of any momentous cultural significance, however. If anything, early European American accounts of this area give the region its cultural flavor through ersatz stories of its original occupation by American Indians (South Dakota Federal Writers Project 1938; Case 1949; Clark 1952b; Rezatto 1989). This is especially true in early accounts (Tallent 1899:644, 695; Brown and Willards 1924:18) of the thermal waters at neighboring Hot Springs, whose cultural meaning was largely inscribed by European American renditions, and in some instances, complete fabrications, of local tribal stories. European American values certainly define the subtext of cultural representations that describe the Black Hills and specific sites within their reaches such as Wind Cave or the Hot Springs. Nevertheless, there is really no special or unique cultural relationship to the local landscape in the traditions of European Americans who settled in this area after 1877 other than its scientific interest and its particular place in the evolution of the region's recreational and tourist industries. Thus, while scores of travel books, brochures, and pamphlets have been written with a superlative language of the extraordinary to promote the Hills' majestic beauty, there is no evidence that later generations of European Americans ever regarded them as a consecrated enclosure or a holy place (Federal Writers Project 1938; Case 1949; Clark 1952b). Indeed, Helen Rezatto (1989: 19) asserts: "The whiteman has no ancient legends about the Black Hills, and most of his modern ones are about gold."

This stands in marked contrast to the region's American Indian inhabitants. Historically, as we have already seen, the Black Hills had importance for them economically too. The Hills were valued for the richness and diversity of their natural resources. They provided food, medicine, fuel, and materials for manufacturing. Equally important were the spiritual attachments of local tribes to the Hills as a site for the origin of some of their most sacred traditions and religious observances. For some of the tribal nations known to have lived in this area, most notably the Lakotas and the Cheyennes, the Black Hills were the sacred center of their universe. Thus, the taking of the Hills by European Americans was perceived not simply as an economic tragedy, a loss of resources to sustain tribal livelihoods and survival, but a catastrophe of cosmic proportions where the very foundations of tribal identities and relationships to the universe were at stake (New Holy 1997, 1998).

Today, the spiritual attachment of the Lakotas and other tribal nations to the Black Hills has become the subject of considerable controversy, which hinges on the status of the Hills as a sacred site and on the rights of American Indian people to access them under the provisions of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 and other federal laws regarding traditional cultural properties. Many traditionalists within the ranks of the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho nations maintain their long held position that the Black Hills are sacred and have stood as a spiritual center to their peoples for countless generations. A number of historians and anthropologists have challenged the temporal depth of these assertions, arguing that while the adherents may very well be sincere in their beliefs, their ideas about the sacredness of the Black Hills are recent inventions promulgated for political ends. Other scholars, however, have been more supportive of the traditionalists' claims, marshaling a wide assortment of evidence to demonstrate that many tribal nations have had a long-standing spiritual attachment to the Black Hills. In order to sort out and evaluate the controversy, in which Wind Cave and its environs occupy such a pivotal place, tribal beliefs about the area of Wind Cave need to be situated in a wider cultural and historical context. This section seeks to provide this context in order to give a better understanding of the nature of the sacred landscape on which Wind Cave National Park now sits.